

[By Sam Hemingway, Burlington Free Press](#)

The first 298 of the nearly 1,500 Vermont National Guard soldiers going to Afghanistan flew out of Burlington International Airport on a sunny Sunday afternoon following a sometimes emotional farewell ceremony on the University of Vermont campus earlier in the day.

"I don't want to let him go, but I am so proud of him," a tearful Suzy Yustin said

As she spoke, Yustin clutched the arm of her son, Spc. Logan Yustin, 22, of Bridport, inside the UVM tennis complex where the farewell event was held. Her husband, David, stood close by. The Yustins' other son, Luke, was an Iraq war veteran who died in an automobile accident in September.

Nearby, a military band dressed in fatigues pumped out patriotic tunes. Across the big room next to Patrick Gymnasium, farewells were the order of the day: Soldiers hugged their spouses and children, chatted with loved ones, posed for photos one last time.

"It's a job. I'll see a lot, do a lot," Sgt. John Fay, 30, of Huntington said matter-of-factly of his deployment as he stood with his wife, Bobbie Sue, and two young daughters. For Fay, it will be his second tour of duty to the war-torn region; he served in Ramadi as part of Task Force Saber in 2005 and 2006.

The departing soldiers, who left aboard a commercial 747 jet, will be joined by the rest of the nearly 1,500 soldiers at Camp Atterbury in Indiana following three similar good-bye events this month and next. They will go on a brief break over the holidays, but should be in Afghanistan by March, 2010.

It is the Vermont guard's largest deployment since World War II.

The mission the soldiers are expected to undertake is to help upgrade the Afghan national security forces over the next year in northern and eastern Afghanistan. The task was given heightened importance by President Barack Obama during his speech to the nation last week.

Departure day for the soldiers who left Sunday began early. By 8:30 a.m., most of them and the family members and friends who accompanied them had already made the trip to Burlington and were chatting together inside the tennis complex. The event was closed to the general public.

At 9:25, the soldiers assembled in formation in the center of the room, with their families and friends seated on either side.

The room grew quiet. The first of the speakers at the event, Maj. Gen. Michael Dubie, the guard's adjutant general, walked up to the podium on a platform in front of the soldiers and leaned into a microphone.

"Good morning, mountain warriors," Dubie said.

"Good morning, sir," the soldiers shouted back in thunderous unison.

Dubie reminded the soldiers that Vermonters have served the nation with distinction in the past, and said he expects they will do the same in Afghanistan.

"You are the best equipped, the best led, the best trained force Vermont has ever put on the field of battle," Dubie said. "You will not fail. You will make us proud. God bless you."

Gov. James Douglas told the troops that Vermont will miss them while they are gone and that "we will all have to pick up the slack" caused by their departure. "While you are doing your duty, I promise you we will do ours, here on the home front," Douglas said.

Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., said the soldiers' dedication to their mission was inspirational. "Why you put on your uniform, why you're going to stand in harm's way for your country, that is

something that ennobles everybody in the state. We're incredibly proud to be your neighbors," Leahy said.

Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., told the families of the departing soldiers they should not hesitate to ask for help while their loved one is off in Afghanistan. "We are going to be with you as well as with the men and women in combat," Sanders said.

Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt., echoed his colleagues' sentiments. "Each and every one of us here, each and every Vermonter who does not walk in your shoes, nevertheless sends you his and her best because we value, all of us value, your service," Welch said.

The gathering was then treated to a surprise. Dubie announced that all of UVM's varsity sports teams will be dedicating their seasons to the Vermont guard soldiers and will display a miniature version of the Green Mountain Boys' historic battle flag on their team uniforms.

Following the half-hour of speeches, the soldiers received their formal mobilization order and, moments later, marched out of the tennis complex to the applause of the crowd and the flashes of their cameras snapping off more photos.

Outside, a set of former soldiers held American flags on each side of a sidewalk as the soldiers walked by and then boarded four buses for the short ride to the Burlington airport, escorted by police cruisers with their blue lights flashing.

Lt. Brian Dubie, brother of the adjutant general, attended the event but did not speak. He later shook some of the soldiers' hands on the walkway and was by his brother's side at the Vermont Air Guard facility as the soldiers exited the guard hangar and walked to the 747 jet.

The deployed Vermonters are among 3,100 soldiers from guard units in New England and elsewhere who will be providing training to Afghan army police, and border patrol agents. Another 150 soldiers each from Maine and New Hampshire will leave from their states and join the Vermonters in Indiana this week.

They will all be part of the Vermont 86th Infantry Brigade Combat Team and be under the leadership of Col. Will Roy of Jericho. The Vermont guard disclosed last week that Roy turned down a chance to be promoted to general so he could continue to command the training mission.

"It's never been about promotions," Roy said in an interview Sunday. "It's been about serving with these great soldiers."

Roy said he will leave Vermont with the contingent departing Friday for Camp Atterbury. He said he expects to fly to Afghanistan in January to confer with military leaders there about final revisions to the mission plan for the troops he will lead.